

## THINK PROJECT

Shamokin Area High School

12<sup>th</sup> Grade English

### **Why Writing is Important**

Writing is power. To advance in today's world one needs to be adept in their writing skills. Teaching students the proper way to write is highly beneficial to them. It will allow them to express themselves effectively. Whether it is for standardized testing or for a job interview, writing is everywhere. It can be the deciding factor whether one gets a job or not. Being able to communicate with others through writing is an immortal necessity.

Students are being bombarded with different styles of writing through, technology, literature, and media. At any moment of the day, students have multiple different outlets of writing at their finger tips. Students need to learn the difference between sending a friend a text and composing an essay for a class. Students need to learn structure in their writing. Showing students how to construct an effective essay will allow them to clearly express their views. The 5 paragraph essay for is something that is beneficial when it comes to standardized tests, but ultimately stifles the students voice. Students need to know why they are writing. Peter Elbow stresses this in his essay, "A Method for Teaching Writing." He says that, "[u]ntil students have discovered, felt, and accepted criteria, a teacher simply wastes his time trying to teach students to satisfy them." (119) For students to have passion behind their writing, they need to be taught to have pride in their work. In order to have pride in ones work, once again the writer needs to know why they are writing. Students should no longer write for the grade. There should be emotion and enthusiasm behind the writing. The student needs to write with purpose, and believe what he is writing is true. Being able to persuade your audience will benefit students their entire lives, especially in the work environment.

Although, I feel that the mechanics of writing is something to be valued, it should not be the over riding factor of writing. Mechanics should be analyzed by the student, once he/she feels their work is complete. Up until this point the student should be immersed in his/her writings. They should be creating, rather than focusing on technicalities. If a student is focusing too much on the grammar and punctuation of their writing, then they are not focusing on what they want to convey to their reader. This is something that should be stressed in the classroom just as much or more than the mechanics.

When researching before writing, students need to be able to distinguish what a credible source is. There are many sights on the internet with information that could be doctored by anyone. Being able

to do this will only strengthen the student's paper. Once students have found credible sources, they will need to know how to cite them within their paper in order to avoid plagiarism. Paraphrasing is something that needs to be taught in detail. Knowing how to find and cite sources is valuable to the student because writing is cross curricular, and an English class is where it can be taught in its entirety without taking any time away from other topics.

Through a unit solely dedicated to a writing workshop, will teach students, that there is not set writing process. It is not a series of steps (pre-writing, drafting, revision, proofreading, and publishing) that are to be strictly followed. The steps presented in this scholastically accepted writing process are intertwined and constantly repetitive. A writer does not naturally go from one step to the next. In the natural writing process, these steps are repetitive, both physically and mentally. Students should feel free to change their writings. It is not cut and dry. They should not feel that just because they have moved onto drafting that cannot return to pre-writing.

In this unit, students will focus on expressive writing. Journaling will be a key factor in this. Through journaling students will become more familiar with writing. As they practice writing often, it will become natural to them. Students will work together to improve their writings. Having a peer look over your work could be more insightful than solely having the teacher analyze the writing. Students should feel comfortable with their writings. Teaching students that writing should not be feared or dreaded is something this unit strives to accomplish. Students should not fear that red ink is going to slaughter their final products.

### **Plan**

After observing Mr. B's classroom, and reading student writing samples, we saw a need for writing practice and instruction. The students do not seem to respond to traditional writing instructional methods, so we aim to take a more expressivist approach to the teaching of writing. We intend to have them become more intrinsically motivated to write, and we believe that the best way to do this is to have them choose topics and write for real-world situations. Each writing activity will be based around a topic of the student's choice. We will have them write things like professional e-mails, business letters, and excerpts from college essays to help prepare their writing for real-world situations. We will also be

helping Mr. B guide the students through a research project for his class. Our activities are aimed to help students connect the academic writing they are doing for Mr. B's class to the real-world kind of writing they will need in life beyond high school.

Based on a survey that we had the students fill out, most of them are not doing much writing other than on social media sites, and most of them do not care much about writing or see the value in it. Our aim is to introduce to them to more practical ways of writing that will benefit them in their future endeavors. Since most of the students indicated on the surveys that they plan on attending a college or university for at least two years, they will need to know how to write in an academic setting. Our goal is to increase their confidence level in their own writing, so they will be better equipped for this caliber of writing. Our approach is to make writing real and relevant for them. We will also build our activities so that they are prepared for the final products, which include one business letter and one final research paper. These products are in conjunction with goals that both we and Mr. Bailey have determined for the students.

## Writing Survey

1. How would you best describe your plans after High School?
  - a. 2-year college/university
  - b. 4-year college/university
  - c. More than 4 years of schooling (ex. Pursuing a Master's Degree or higher)
  - d. Vocational/Technical School
  - e. Work force
  - f. Military
  - g. No plans
2. Place a check next to the following items you find yourself writing on a regular basis:
  - a. Text messages
  - b. E-mails
  - c. Facebook posts
  - d. Twitter posts
  - e. Instagram posts
  - f. Blog posts
  - g. Letters
  - h. Essays
  - i. Poems
  - j. Stories
  - k. Newspaper articles
  - l. Resumes
  - m. Advertisements
  - n. College applications (including college essays)
  - o. Job applications (including personal statements)
  - p. Newsletters
3. Place an additional check next to any of the above items in which you feel comfortable writing.
4. Place a check next to the following statement that best describes your level of interest in writing:
  - a. Extremely interested
  - b. Interested
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Not interested
  - e. Extremely not interested
5. Place a check next to the following statement that best describes your confidence level in your own writing:
  - a. Very confident
  - b. Confident
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Not confident
  - e. Not at all confident

6. Place a check next to the following statement that best describes how important/relevant you think writing is in your life right now:

- a. Very important
- b. Important
- c. Neutral
- d. Not important
- e. Not at all important

6b. Which types of writing (from question 2) do you use the most?

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7. Place a check next to the following statement that best describes how important you think writing will be in your future career.

- a. Very important
- b. Important
- c. Neutral
- d. Not important
- e. Not at all important

7b. Which types of writing (from question 2) do you think you will use the most?

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## THINK Lesson Plan

### Conceptual Goals

1. Help students differentiate between informal (social) language and formal (academic or professional) language.
2. Help students to consider audience when writing and how different audiences will elicit different types of writing.
3. Help students write in real-world settings. They will need to be aware of formatting expectations, grammatical expectations, etiquette expectations, etc.

### Lesson Objectives

1. Students will learn the parts of a business letter in order to practice format/etiquette for professional writing.
2. Students will write their own business letter in order to apply formatting, grammatical, and etiquette skills to context-appropriate writing.
3. Students will discuss the difference between a business letter and a letter to a friend in order to differentiate between when it is appropriate to use levels of formality in language.

### Standards

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1d** Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5** Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.6** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

### Materials

White board  
Lab computers (one for each student)  
Department printer

### Lesson

1. Introduce lesson
  - Tell students what we will be doing today
  - As a motivational device, ask them how many of them plan to go to college or enter the work force in the next few months.
  - Then ask them if they have ever written a business letter.
  - Explain to them that this, and other types of professional writing, is something they will need to be able to do as they move on from high school and into the "real world".
2. Instruct students on the format of a business letter
  - 6 parts of a business letter: Date (Heading), Inside Address, Salutation, Body, Closing, Printed Name,
  - Explain that letter is in block format, which means left-side alignment.
  - Explain spacing: 2 spaces in between everything but the closing and the printed name (to leave room for a signature).
  - Fill out a mock letter together
3. Give assignment

- Explain to students what content they will be expected to write today.
  - Students will pretend as though they are applying to a job, college/university, or writing to a department head in the field of study they wish to enter.
  - Students will need to write about their experience at Shamokin High School and how at least three different experiences have made them a great candidate for the position/field.
  - Remind students that they are to treat this as an actual letter to a potential employer, professor, etc., which means they must consider things like word choice, grammar, format, level of formality, and appropriate tone.
  - Explain to students that even if they do not feel as though their experience at Shamokin was entirely positive, that they must consider what their purpose in writing is for this assignment (to obtain a job) and make sure that their writing aligns with their purpose.
4. Reflect
- After their business letters are printed, gather them for group discussion.
  - Ask students to take a minute and think about how their business letter might be different from, for example, a letter to a friend.
  - Ask them to consider how they would change their word choices, their grammar, their level of formality, and their content if they were writing not to an employer or professor but to a good friend.
  - Have students discuss as a class what these differences might look like.
  - Also discuss what students chose to include and exclude in terms of content and why.
5. Closing
- Explain to students that audience really affects how we write and how we think about writing. If we are writing to a friend, our language might be a bit less formal than if we were writing to a potential employer or professor.
  - Explain to students that different situations call for different types of action, and they should keep this in mind when they make choices about language. For example, it is okay to use "Shamokinisms" when talking with friends from Shamokin, but they probably want to stay away from certain colloquialisms when writing professionally.
  - The key is differentiation.

### **Homework**

- Students must consider their audience and their purpose for writing as they finish up their research papers. If they need to go back and change anything in terms of formality, content, grammar, format, etc., they should do this with our discussion about differentiation in mind. Research papers will be turned in on Tuesday, May 7<sup>th</sup>.

### **Assessment**

- Formative:
- We will walk around and assist students while they are writing their business letters. If any student is having trouble with any part, we will personally guide them and if enough of them are having trouble, we will stop and redirect their attention to the board to review the instructions of the assignment. We will also walk around and make sure that the content of their letters is relevant to the assignment. They are allowed to write about whatever they want, but they are supposed to be keeping their audience in mind, which are their potential future employers.
- Summative:
- Students will turn in a typed business letter and we will be looking for: proper formatting, content appropriateness, grammar, spelling.

## THINK Project

### Final Reflection

When first entering the classroom, I was a little leery. Krytsta had already been familiar with the place, students, and teachers. The highest level classroom I had ever been in was 7<sup>th</sup> Grade. 12<sup>th</sup> grade was a big step. I tried to reflect on when I was a high school senior. I knew that towards the end of the year I had completely let go of anything school related. The more teachers tried to force new ideas on me, the more I thought about graduating and summer. Most of these students weren't all that different, except they had Mr. Bailey. They were having fun and learning. His classroom was the most relaxed classroom I had ever been in. Mr. Bailey values grades, but it is not the end all and be all of his teaching. He values making sure that his students are learning knowledge rather than simply regurgitating facts back at it. He keeps his students on a points system. If they are trying in class, and attempting to learn then their points are high. Mr. Bailey realizes that being a teaching that does not stop at textbooks and grades. It's teaching students how to be stand up individuals.

Before getting into our observing, Krysta had mentioned that Mr. Bailey had previously discussed the students writing capabilities. They were not where Mr. Bailey had like them to be for being seniors in high school. While talking with Mr. Bailey, we discussed the approaches he had taken to the writing process. His approaches were very structured and formal. His main focus was grammar. Although, I think there is value behind grammar, and often find myself correcting other's lack of grammar in my head, I feel that it should not be the overriding factor of writing. After taking Theory and Practice of Writing, and being introduced to the ideas of Peter Elbow, it is hard for me not to feel sympathy for students during the writing process. I feel like the issues they are dealing with as high school seniors are the same issues I deal with as college senior. Yes, my writing capabilities have definitely improved. However, part of me still loses my thoughts to grammatical errors. I spend ten minutes trying to figure out if I should use "effect" or "affect," or I think, "I just used that same word in the previous paragraph." I lose multiple ideas because I'm a college senior, English Education major, and if my writing isn't correct, how am I going to teach students how to write? This should not be. Students need to feel that their writing is a safe zone for them. It's something that should allow them to express themselves any way they see fit. After the ideas are on the paper, and you can see that the student took the time to write his/her thoughts down, and actually believes what they have written on paper, then start to work on the mechanics. As students become comfortable with writing, and don't see it as a punishment, they will begin to more readily put their thoughts to paper. Mr. Bailey expressed that he wanted more from his students. He wanted their sentences to be descriptive and elaborate. Taking a more expressive stance on writing is something that I value greatly. After discussing with Krysta and Mr. Bailey, Krysta and I devised a plan where the students had control of what they were writing. I have found that, when students enjoy what they are writing, they tend to be more elaborate in their writing. If a student feels passionate about the subject at hand, then their thoughts and opinions flood the page.

Krytsta and I gave the students a survey asking them about their writing. We wanted to know how comfortable they were with writing, what their main outlets of writing were, and the value they placed on writing. We found that the main sources of writing for a senior at Shamokin



Area High School were social media sites and texting. This wasn't a surprise, and it was something Krysta and I could relate to. We knew that for success in the future, being able to write and express oneself is a valued concept. If students aren't able to convey a desired message to their reader, then something is being lost in their writing.

Since Mr. Bailey was in the middle of teaching them how to write their senior research paper, Krysta and I felt it was a perfect time to introduce a mini writing workshop into the classroom. Our original plan was to have the students pick a topic of their choice, and write a series of pieces about it. We had ideas of them a poem, a thesis statement, a text message, formal and informal letters about their chosen topic. Executing this idea was a little more difficult than we had planned. Krysta and I had all these great ideas that the students were going to be able to see how and why writing differs. By using all these different forms of writing, we were hoping the students would find one they were comfortable with. Once the students were comfortable, we hoped that the ideas would flow easily for them. We discussed this with Mr. Bailey, and he approved of it. When Krysta and I started to put our lesson together, we realized that we had too many activity plans jumbled into one lesson. We decided to solely focus on the letter ideas. Since they are high school seniors we thought this idea would be practical and relevant to where they are in their academic career. For some of the students, it was going to aid them in their college years, and for other we thought they could use the knowledge of constructing a letter in the work force or army.

The day we were putting our plan into place had me nervous. I wasn't sure how the students were going to react. Although, I had become comfortable with the students, and Mr. Bailey was more than welcoming, I wasn't sure how well this plan was going to be executed. It went extremely well. Once again, I needed to remind myself that underestimating students is something I need to try and stop. There were some students in the classroom that didn't always seem eager to learn. They would come in sit down, and put their headphones in or sleep. I had gone in to co-teach the lesson with Krysta assuming that they would follow suit. I was more than overjoyed to find that I had been mistaken. These students that very rarely even participated in class were writing these letters. Not only were they writing, but they were asking questions. I felt like they actually care about their writing, and that's what I had hoped for after the lesson. The students were given a short lesson about the structure of the business letter. They were told that they had to write about how their experience at Shamokin Area High School would make them the best candidate for a job. They were enjoying their writing. It was a way for them to see how much they had grown in their four years of high school. The final responses we got were surprising. Although, there were some grammatical and spelling errors, the students had fun with it. They're personalities jumped off the page.

After finishing up at Shamokin, I couldn't help but think about the students, and the true potential that each of them possesses. I feel like the problem with writing that we tried to correct was beneficial to both us and the students. Seeing them enjoying writing is something that will forever hold a place in my heart. It was not expected. At the beginning, I went into the classroom for the sake of the grade. Now, I see that it was the actual interactions with the students, seeing them advance, and having them ask us for advice that meant the most to me. There's no doubt in my mind anymore that I want to be a teacher. I want to be able to see common problems in the Language Arts classroom, and I want to find ways to combat them that engage students. Student

engagement and establishing a rapport with students is key to the learning process. Flexibility is something that I hope comes from experience. Although our plan had changed a lot from the beginning, I feel as though Krysta and I were effective in our convictions of taking a more expressive view to the writing process. Like always, time constraints are a burden. Once in the comfort of our own classroom, we can take a more extensive approach to the issue of writing.